

Great Balls Of Fire

And on the eighth day God created the piano. And out of it burst a mighty sight; Jerry Lee Lewis with TWO pianos, a tabernacle of music in each hand and he was playing “Great Balls Of Fire”.

When Lewis released this classic rocker in 1957 the conservatives who always hated rock and roll really started to circle the wagons and keep the women in the house. He already had violated the senses of those who believed rock and roll to be the devil’s work with “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On”; but with this...the greatest rock and roll piano player of them all had gone too far:

You shake my nerves and you rattle my brain
Too much love drives a man insane
You broke my will, oh what a thrill
Goodness gracious great balls of fire

Jerry Lee, who was raised in a religious household, might just as well have been selling porn outside the Grand Old Opry. He *was*, however, conflicted about recording this song written by Jack Hammer and Otis Blackwell (who wrote over a thousand songs including “Don’t Be Cruel”, “All Shook Up” and the Peggy Lee favorite “Fever”). Sam Phillips who owned Sun Records had to convince this small town Christian boy that his soul wasn’t being sold to the devil to get him to put it down on tape.

Great Balls Of Fire’s first four notes sell the song. The rest is commentary. Once in, Jerry Lee thumps, bumps, spits fire, does everything but sit down and play. It is a raucous rebuke to anyone who ever took piano lessons. There are minimalist drums and a barely heard bass to give “Balls” the right to even be called a song. It is a swirling steaming eighty eight keys knocked and kicked around by a guy who thinks that feet are properly used on a piano. It was the very first rock and roll song that Eric Clapton saw on TV. He thought Jerry Lee Lewis was from another planet.

And he is; he doesn’t belong among mere humans who go to work, pay their bills and honor God and country. Jerry Lee Lewis will be remembered as a great con artist. He conned us all into worshipping those who break all the rules.